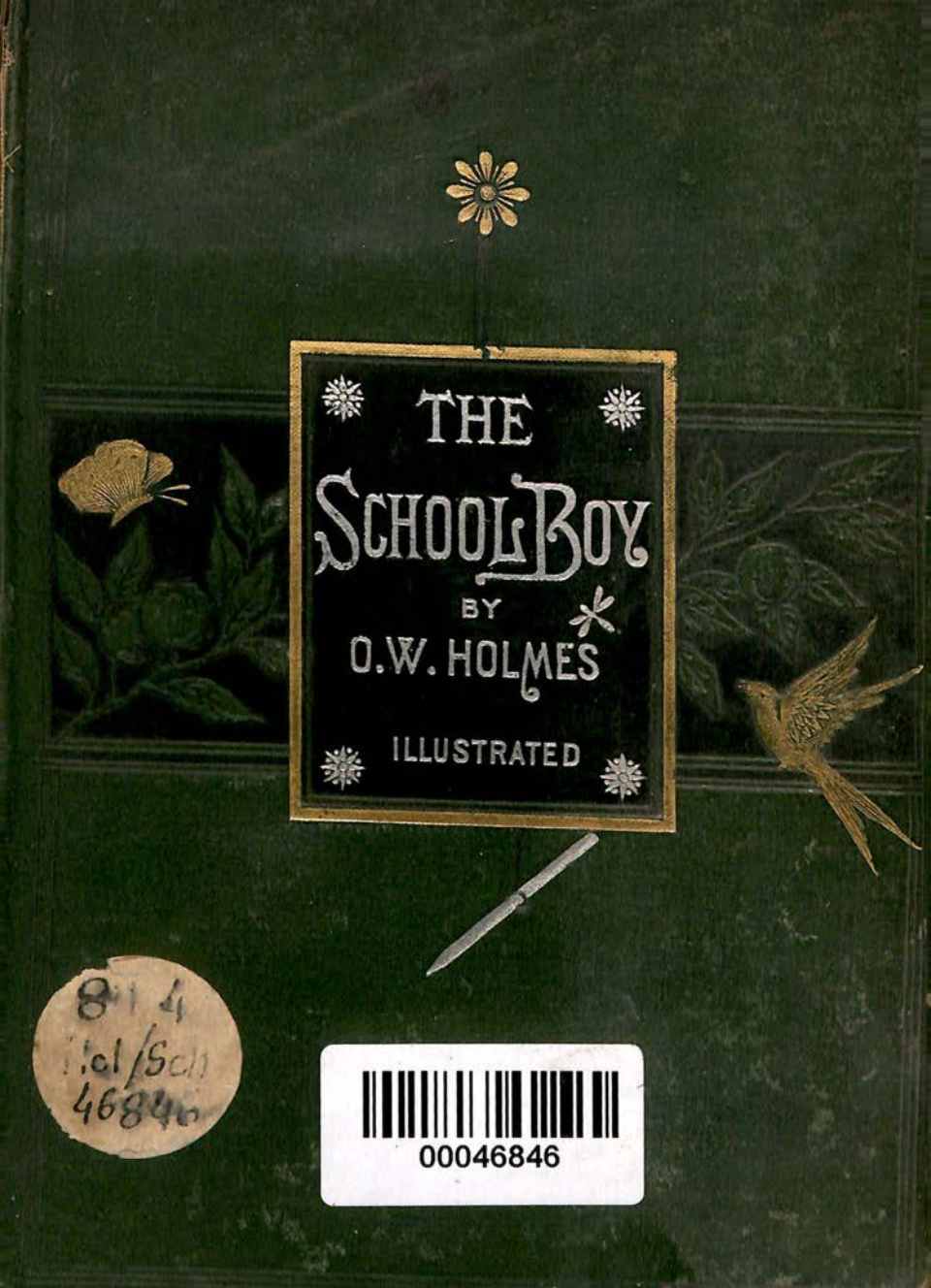

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THE SCHOOL-BOY.

BY

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES.

46846

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS.

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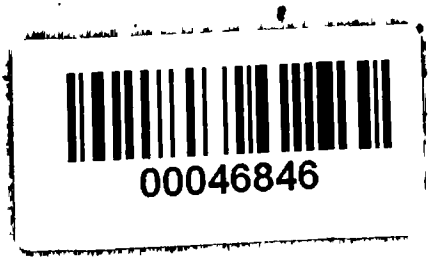

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To the

STUDENTS OF PHILLIPS ACADEMY,

ANDOVER, MASSACHUSETTS.

Read at the Centennial Celebration,

June 6, 1878.

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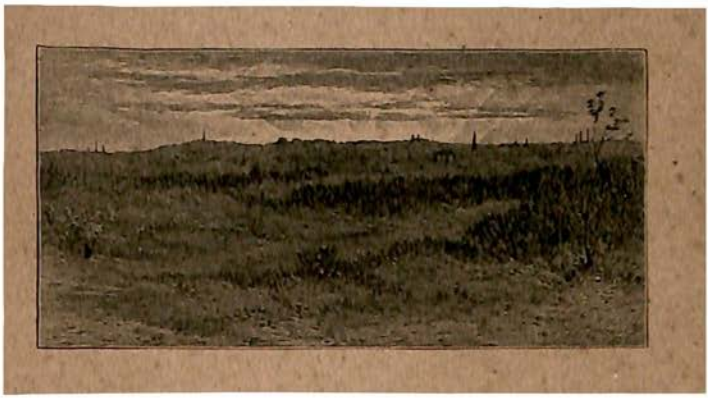
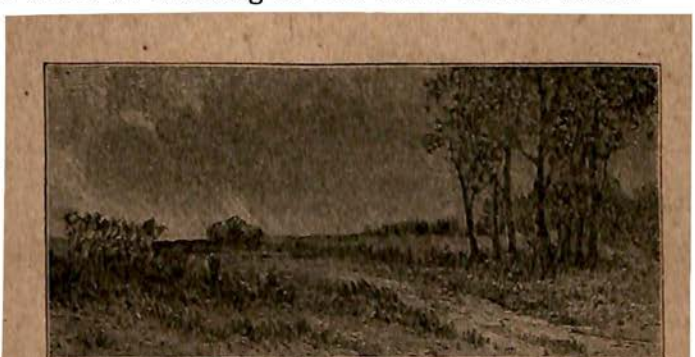
THE SCHOOL-BOY.

THE SCHOOL-BOY.

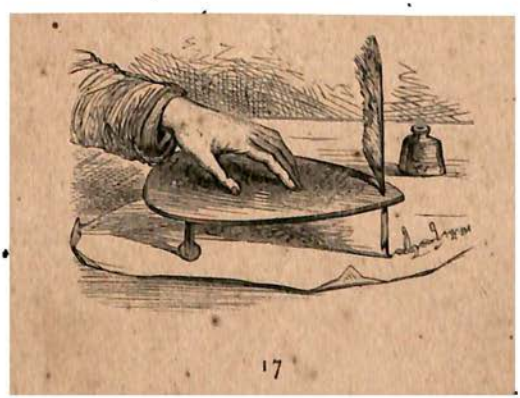


THESE hallowed precincts, long to memory dear,
Smile with fresh welcome as our feet draw near;
With softer gales the opening leaves are fanned,
With fairer hues the kindling flowers expand,
The rose-bush reddens with the blush of June,
The groves are vocal with their minstrel's tune,
The mighty elm, beneath whose arching shade
The wandering children of the forest strayed,

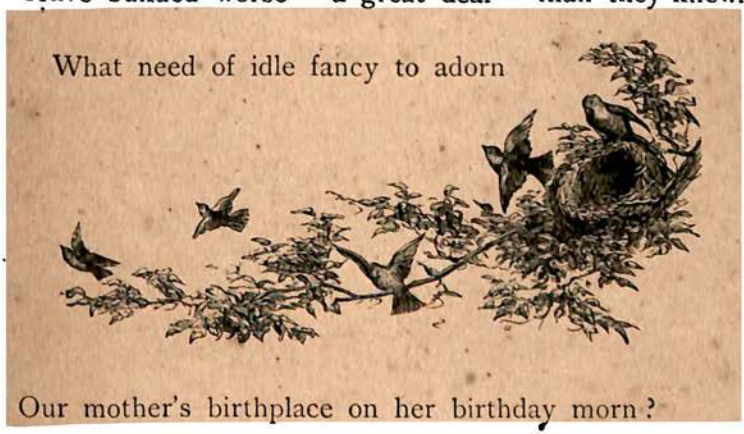
Greets the glad morning in its bridal dress,
And spreads its arms the gladsome dawn to bless.
Is it an idle dream that nature shares
Our joys, our griefs, our pastimes, and our cares?
Is there no summons when, at morning's call,
The sable vestments of the darkness fall?
Does not meek evening's low-voiced *Ave* blend
With the soft vesper as its notes ascend?
Is there no whisper in the perfumed air,
When the sweet bosom of the rose is bare?
Does not the sunshine call us to rejoice?
Is there no meaning in the storm-cloud's voice?



No silent message when from midnight skies
Heaven looks upon us with its myriad eyes?
Or shift the mirror, say our dreams diffuse
O'er life's pale landscape their celestial hues,
Lend heaven the rainbow it has never known,
And robe the earth in glories not its own,
Sing their own music in the summer breeze,
With fresher foliage clothe the stately trees,
Stain the June blossoms with a livelier dye
And spread a bluer azure on the sky,—
Blest be the power that works its lawless will
And finds the weediest patch an Eden still;



No walls so fair as those our fancies build, —
No view so bright as those our visions gild!
So ran my lines, as pen and paper met,
The truant goose-quill travelling like Planchette;
Too ready servant, whose deceitful ways
Full many a slipshod line, alas! betrays;
Hence of the rhyming thousand not a few
Have builded worse — a great deal — than they knew.



What need of idle fancy to adorn
Our mother's birthplace on her birthday morn?

Hers are the blossoms of eternal spring,
From these green boughs her new-fledged birds take wing,

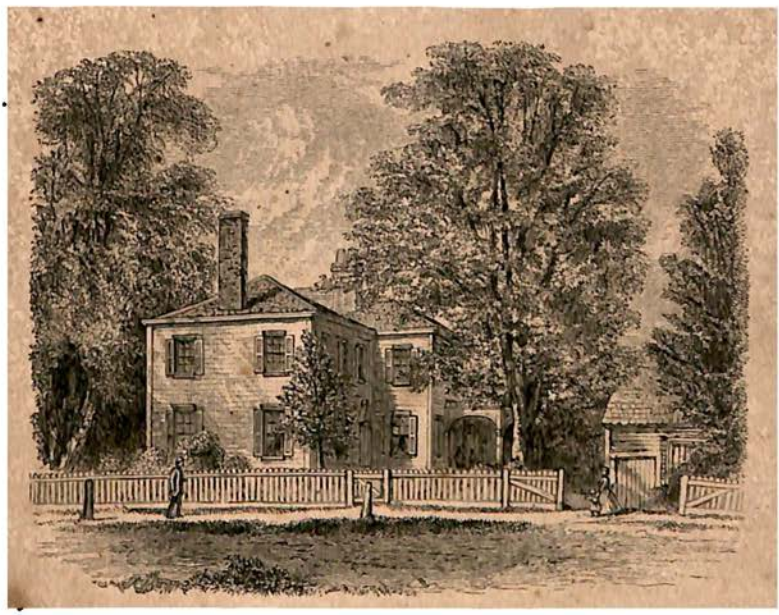
These echoes hear their earliest carols sung,
In this old nest the brood is ever young.
If some tired wanderer, resting from his flight,
Amid the gay young choristers alight,
These gather round him, mark his faded plumes

That faintly still the far-off grove perfumes,
And listen, wondering if some feeble note
Yet lingers, quavering in his weary throat: —
I, whose fresh voice yon red-faced temple knew,
What tune is left me, fit to sing to you?
Ask not the grandeurs of a labored song,

But let my easy couplets slide along;
Much could I tell you that you know too well;
Much I remember, but I will not tell;
Age brings experience; graybeards oft are wise,
But oh! how sharp a youngster's ears and eyes!

My cheek was bare of adolescent down
When first I sought the Academic town:

Slow rolls the coach along the dusty road,
Big with its filial and parental load;
The frequent hills, the lonely woods are past,



The school-boy's chosen home is reached at last.
I see it now, the same unchanging spot,
The swinging gate, the little garden-plot,
The narrow yard, the rock that made its floor,
The flat, pale house, the knocker-garnished door,
The small, trim parlor, neat, decorous, chill,
The strange, new faces, kind, but grave and still;

Two, creased with age, — or what I then called age, —
Life's volume open at its fiftieth page ;
One a shy maiden's, pallid, placid, sweet
As the first snow-drop which the sunbeams greet ;
One the last nursling's ; slight she was, and fair,
Her smooth white forehead warmed with auburn hair ;
Last came the virgin Hymen long had spared,
Whose daily cares the grateful household shared,
Strong, patient, humble ; her substantial frame
Stretched the chaste draperies I forbear to name.
Brave, but with effort, had the school-boy come
To the cold comfort of a stranger's home ;
How like a dagger to my sinking heart
Came the dry summons, "it is time to part ;
"Good-by !" "Goo-ood-by !" one fond maternal kiss. . . .
Homesick as death ! Was ever pang like this ? . . .
Too young as yet with willing feet to stray
From the tame fireside, glad to get away, —

Too old to let my watery grief appear, —
And what so bitter as a swallowed tear!
One figure still my vagrant thoughts pursue;
First boy to greet me, Ariel, where are you?
Imp of all mischief, heaven alone knows how

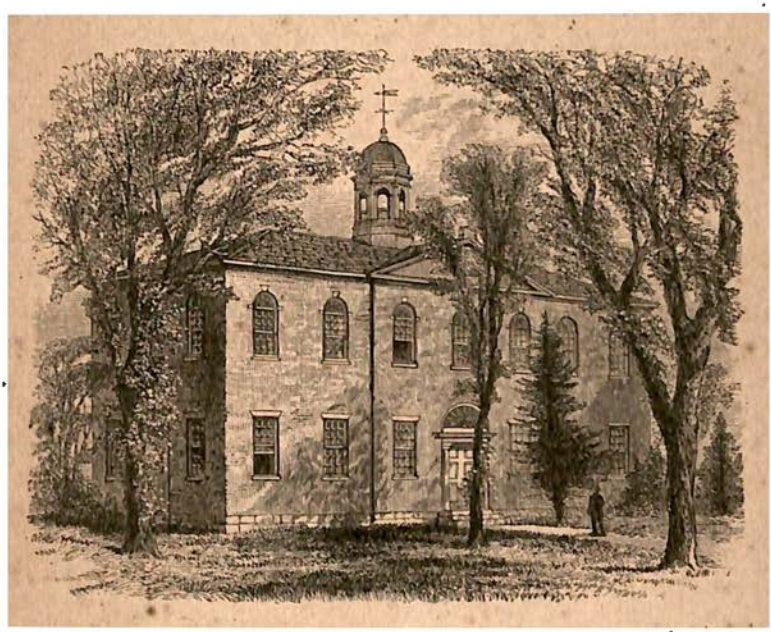
You learned it all, — are you an angel now,
Or tottering gently down the slope of years,
Your face grown sober in the vale of tears?
Forgive my freedom if you are breathing still;
If in a happier world, I know you will.
You were a school-boy — what beneath the sun
So like a monkey? I was also one.

THE SCHOOL-BOY.

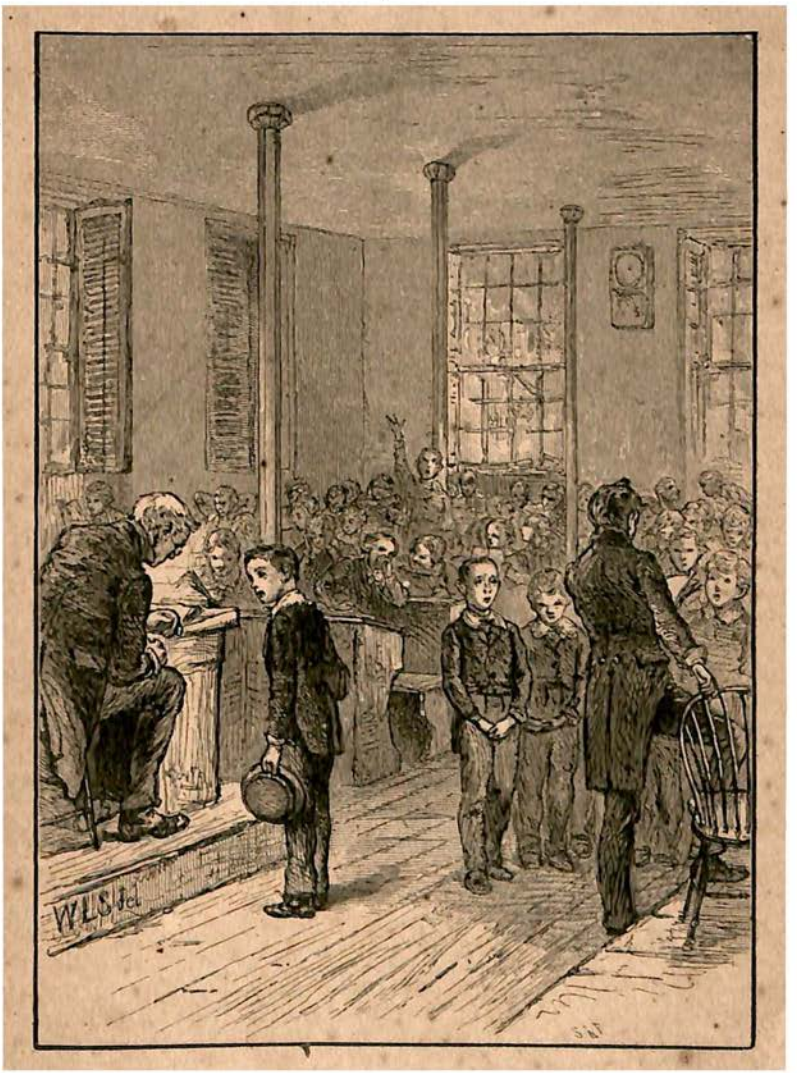
Strange, sure enough, to see what curious shoots
The nursery raises from the study's roots!
In those old days the very, very good
Took up more room — a little — than they should;
Something too much one's eyes encountered then
Of serious youth and funeral-visaged men;
The solemn elders saw life's mournful half, —
Heaven sent this boy, whose mission was to laugh,
Drollest of buffos, Nature's odd protest,
A catbird squealing in a blackbird's nest.
Kind, faithful Nature! While the sour-eyed Scot, —
Her cheerful smiles forbidden or forgot, —
Talks only of his preacher and his kirk, —

Hears five-hour sermons for his Sunday work, —
Praying and fasting till his meagre face
Gains its due length, the genuine sign of grace, —
An Ayrshire mother in the land of Knox
Her embryo poet in his cradle rocks; —
Nature, long shivering in her dim eclipse,

Steals in a sunbeam to those baby lips;
So to its home her banished smile returns,
And Scotland sweetens with the song of Burns!



The morning came; I reached the classic hall;
A clock-face eyed me, staring from the wall;
Beneath its hands a printed line I read:
YOUTH IS LIFE'S SEED-TIME; so the clock-face said: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Some took its counsel, as the sequel showed, —
Sowed — their wild oats, and reaped as they had sowed.

How all comes back! the upward slanting floor —
The masters' thrones that flank the central door —
The long, outstretching alleys that divide
The rows of desks that stand on either side —
The staring boys, a face to every desk,
Bright, dull, pale, blooming, common, picturesque.

Grave is the Master's look; his forehead wears
Thick rows of wrinkles, prints of worrying cares;
Uneasy lie the heads of all that rule,
His most of all whose kingdom is a school.
Supreme he sits; before the awful frown
That bends his brows the boldest eye goes down;
Not more submissive Israel heard and saw
At Sinai's foot the Giver of the Law.

Less stern he seems, who sits in equal state
On the twin throne and shares the empire's weight;

Around his lips the subtle life that plays
Steals quaintly forth in many a jesting phrase;
A lightsome nature, not so hard to chafe,
Pleasant when pleased; rough-handled, not so safe;
Some tingling memories vaguely I recall,
But to forgive him. God forgive us all!

One yet remains, whose well-remembered name
Pleads in my grateful heart its tender claim;
His was the charm magnetic, the bright look
That sheds its sunshine on the dreariest book;
A loving soul to every task he brought
That sweetly mingled with the lore he taught;
Sprung from a saintly race that never could
From youth to age be anything but good,

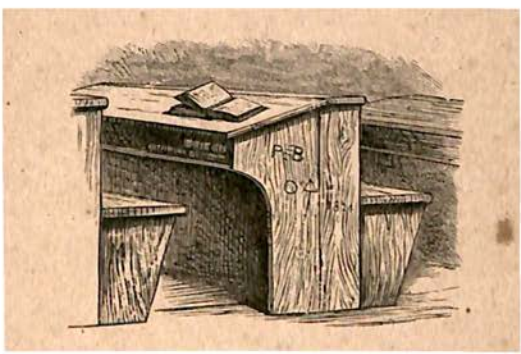
His few brief years in holiest labors spent,
Earth lost too soon the treasure heaven had lent.
Kindest of teachers, studious to divine
Some hint of promise in my earliest line
These faint and faltering words thou canst not hear
Throb from a heart that holds thy memory dear.

As to the traveller's eye the varied plain
Shows through the window of the flying train,
A mingled landscape, rather felt than seen,
A gravelly bank, a sudden flash of green,
A tangled wood, a glittering stream that flows
Through the cleft summit where the cliff once rose,
All strangely blended in a hurried gleam,
Rock, wood, waste, meadow, village, hill-side, stream, —
So, as we look behind us, life appears,
Seen through the vista of our bygone years.

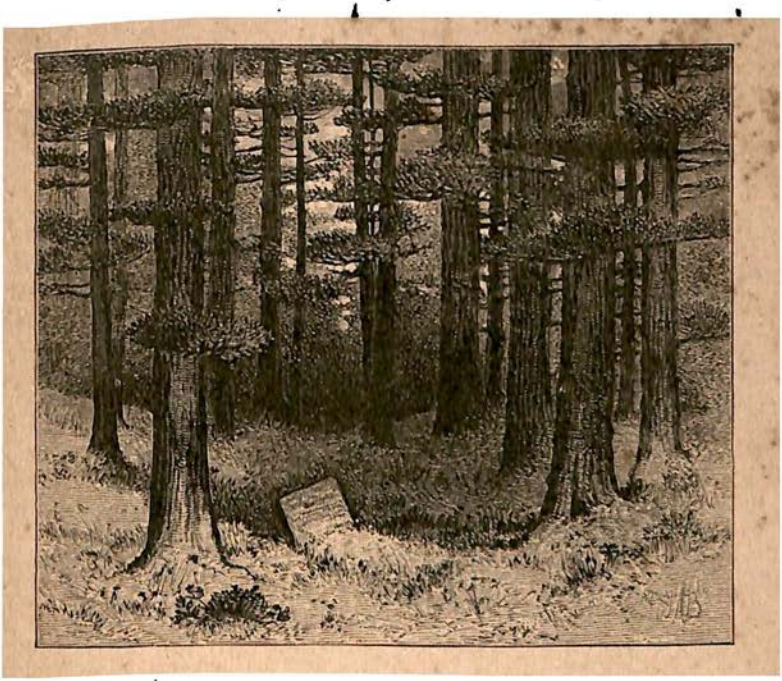
Yet in the dead past's shadow-filled domain,
Some vanished shapes the hues of life retain;

THE SCHOOL-BOY.

Unbidden, oft, before our dreaming eyes
From the vague mists in memory's path they rise.
So comes his blooming image to my view,

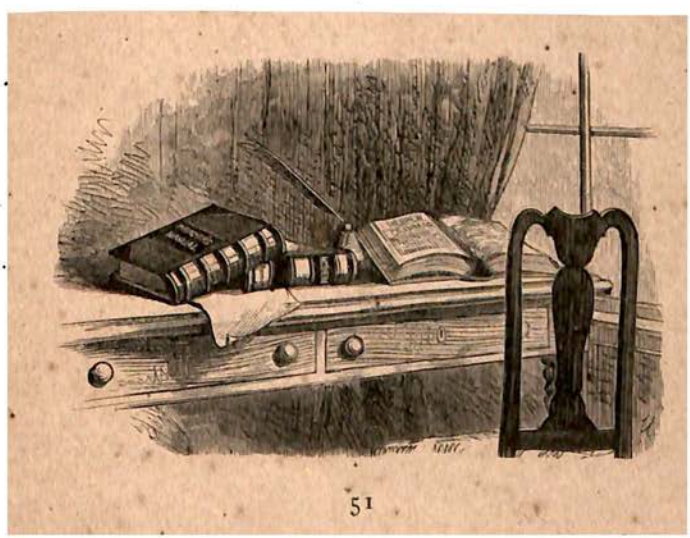


The friend of joyous days when life was new,
Hope yet untamed, the blood of youth unchilled,
No blank arrear of promise unfulfilled,
Life's flower yet hidden in its sheltering fold.
Its pictured canvas yet to be unrolled.
His the frank smile I vainly look to greet,
His the warm grasp my clasping hand should meet;
How would our lips renew their school-boy talk,
Our feet retrace the old familiar walk!

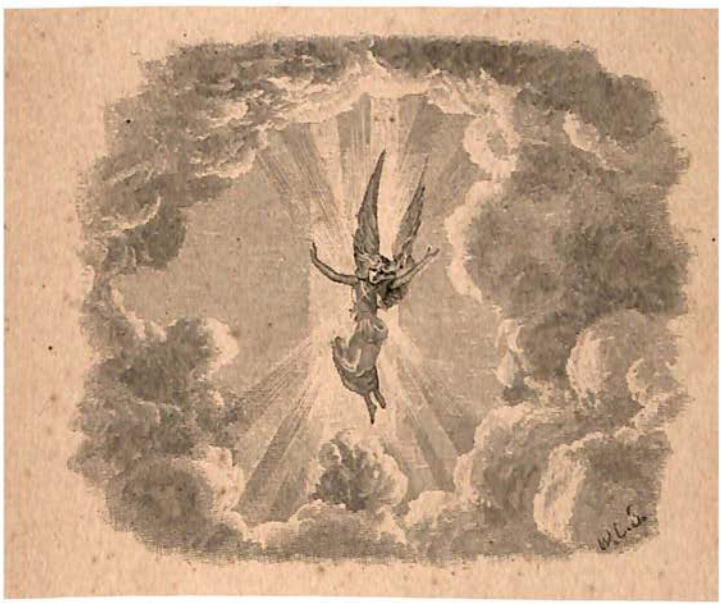


For thee no more earth's cheerful morning shines
Through the green fringes of thy tented pines;
Ah me! is heaven so far thou canst not hear,
Or is thy viewless spirit hovering near,
A fair young presence, bright with morning's glow,
The fresh-cheeked boy of fifty years ago?
Yes, fifty years, with all their circling suns,

Behind them all my glance reverted runs;
Where now that time remote, its griefs, its joys,
Where are its gray-haired men, its bright-haired boys?
Where is the patriarch time could hardly tire, —
The good old, wrinkled, immemorial "squire"?
(An honest treasurer, like a black-plumed swan,
Not every day our eyes may look upon.)
Where the tough champion who, with Calvin's sword,
In wordy conflicts battled for the Lord?
Where the grave scholar, lonely, calm, austere,



Whose voice like music charmed the listening ear,
Whose light rekindled, like the morning star
Still shines upon us through the gates ajar?



Where the still, solemn, weary, sad-eyed man,
Whose care-worn face my wondering eyes would scan, –
His features wasted in the lingering strife
With the pale foe that drains the student's life?
Where my old friend, the scholar, teacher, saint,

Whose creed, some hinted, showed a speck of taint;
He broached his own opinion, which is not
Lightly to be forgiven or forgot;
Some riddle's point, — I scarce remember now, —
Homoi, perhaps, where they said homo—ou.
(If the unlettered greatly wish to know
Where lies the difference betwixt *oi* and *o*,
Those of the curious who have time may search
Among the stale conundrums of their church.) —
Beneath his roof his peaceful life I shared,
And for his modes of faith I little cared, —
I, taught to judge men's dogmas by their deeds,
Long ere the days of india-rubber creeds.
Why should we look one common faith to find,
Where one in every score is color-blind?
If here on earth they know not red from green,
Will they see better into things unseen?
Once more to time's old grave-yard I return

And scrape the moss from memory's pictured urn.
Who, in these days when all things go by steam,
Recalls the stage-coach with its four-horse team?

Its sturdy driver, — who remembers him?
Or the old landlord, saturnine and grim,
Who left our hill-top for a new abode
And reared his sign-post farther down the road?
Still in the waters of the dark Shawshine

Do the young bathers splash and think they 're clean?
Do pilgrims find their way to Indian Ridge,
Or journey onward to the far-off bridge,
And bring to younger ears the story back
Of the broad stream, the mighty Merrimack?
Are there still truant feet that stray beyond
These circling bounds to Pomp's or Haggett's pond,
Or where the legendary name recalls
The forest's earlier tenant — "Deer-jump Falls"?
Yes, every nook these youthful feet explore,
Just as our sires and grandsires did of yore;
So all life's opening paths, where nature led
Their fathers' feet, the children's children tread.
Roll the round century's five score years away,
Call from our storied past that earliest day
When great Eliphalet (I can see him now, —
Big name, big frame, big voice and beetling brow),
Then *young* Eliphalet — ruled the rows of boys

THE SCHOOL-BOY.

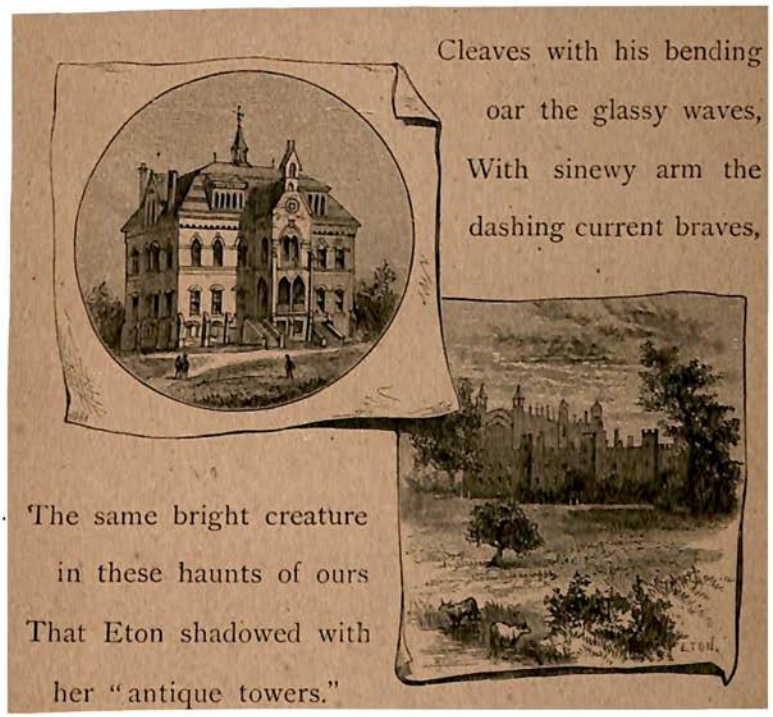
In homespun gray or old world corduroys, —
And save for fashion's whims, the benches show
The self-same youths, the very boys we know.

Time works strange marvels; since I trod the green
And swung the gates, what wonders I have seen!
But come what will, — the sky itself may fall —
As things of course the boy accepts them all.
The prophet's chariot, drawn by steeds of flame,
For daily use our travelling millions claim;
The face we love a sunbeam makes our own;
No more the surgeon hears the sufferer's groan;
What unwrit histories wrapped in darkness lay
Till shovelling Schliemann bared them to the day!

Your Richelieu says, and says it well, my lord,
The pen is (sometimes) mightier than the sword;
Great is the goosequill, say we all; Amen!
Sometimes the spade is mightier than the pen;
It shows where Babel's terraced walls were raised,
The slabs that cracked when Nimrod's palace blazed,

Unearths Mycenæ, rediscovers Troy, —
Calmly he listens, that immortal boy.
A new Prometheus tips our wands with fire,
A mightier Orpheus strains the whispering wire,

Whose lightning thrills the lazy winds outrun
And hold the hours as Joshua stayed the sun, —
So swift, in truth, we hardly find a place
For those dim fictions known as time and space.
Still a new miracle each year supplies, —
See at his work the chemist of the skies,
Who questions Sirius in his tortured rays
And steals the secret of the solar blaze.
Hush! while the window-rattling bugles play
The nation's airs a hundred miles away!
That wicked phonograph! hark! how it swears!
Turn it again and make it say its prayers!
And was it true, then, what the story said
Of Oxford's friar and his brazen head?
While wondering science stands, herself perplexed
At each day's miracle, and asks "what next?"
The immortal boy, the coming heir of all,
Springs from his desk to "urge the flying ball,"



Boy! Where is he? the long-limbed youth inquires,
Whom his rough chin with manly pride inspires;
Ah, when the ruddy cheek no longer glows,
When the bright hair is white as winter snows,
When the dim eye has lost its lambent flame,
Sweet to his ear will be his school-boy name!

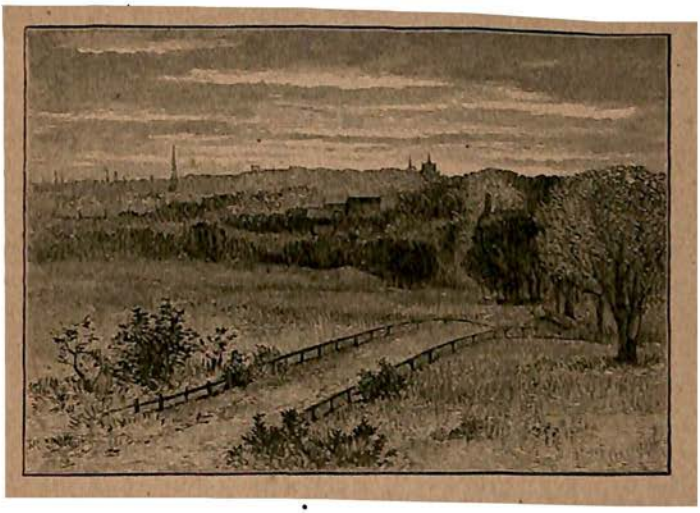
Nor think the difference mighty as it seems
Between life's morning and its evening dreams;
Fourscore, like twenty, has its tasks and toys;
In earth's wide school-house all are girls and boys.

Brothers, forgive my wayward fancy. Who
Can guess beforehand what his pen will do?
Too light my strain for listeners such as these,
Whom graver thoughts and soberer speech shall please.
Is he not here whose breath of holy song
Has raised the downcast eyes of faith so long?
Are they not here, the strangers in your gates,
For whom the wearied ear impatient waits, —
The large-brained scholars whom their toils release, —
The bannered heralds of the Prince of Peace?
Such was the gentle friend whose youth unblamed
In years long past our student-benches claimed;
Whose name, illumined on the sacred page,

Lives in the labors of his riper age;
Such he whose record time's destroying march
Leaves uneffaced on Zion's springing arch:

Not to the scanty phrase of measured song,
Cramped in its fetters, names like these belong;
One ray they lend to gild my slender line, —
Their praise I leave to sweeter lips than mine.

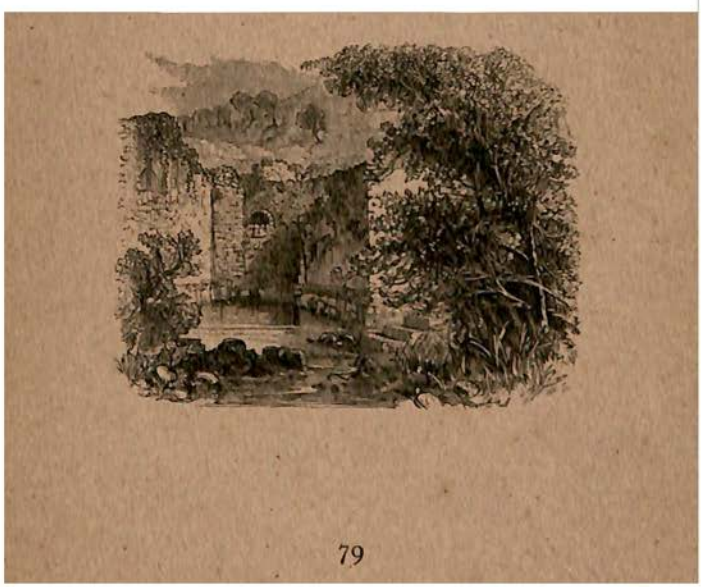
Home of our sires, where learning's temple rose,
While yet they struggled with their banded foes,



As in the west thy century's sun descends,
One parting gleam its dying radiance lends.
Darker and deeper though the shadows fall
From the gray towers on Doubting Castle's wall,
Though Pope and Pagan re-array their hosts,
And her new armor youthful Science boasts,
Truth, for whose altar rose this holy shrine,
Shall fly for refuge to these bowers of thine;
No past shall chain her with its rusted vow,

No Jew's phylactery bind her Christian brow,
But faith shall smile to find her sister free
And nobler manhood draw its life from thee.

Long as the arching skies above thee spread,
As on thy groves the dews of heaven are shed,
With currents widening still from year to year,
And deepening channels, calm, untroubled, clear,
Flow the twin streamlets from thy sacred hill —
Pieria's fount and Siloam's shaded rill!



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